

**Literature, Religion and Self-Conquest: A Comparative Study of T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and Ahmed Yerima's *Attahiru*.**

**By**

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**Abstract:**

*Comparative literature helps us to understand the relationship between two or more literatures or between literature and other fields of knowledge. In the light of this, the paper studies the relationship between literature and religion using the two selected plays, T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and Ahmed Yerima's *Attahiru*. Specifically, the work examines the issue of self-conquest in the two plays and demonstrates that, in spite of the differences in terms of socio-cultural context, geographical distance as well as periodical gap, there is close affinity between these two plays especially in the way they depict their historical protagonists as embodiment of besieged religious values. The paper further argues that, there is indeed a similarity in terms of characterization of the tragic heroes in their journey towards achieving self-conquest in the two texts.*

**Key Words:** *Literature, drama, religion, self-conquest*

**Introduction**

The discipline of Comparative Literature makes it possible to compare texts that are distinct in nature, culture and history. It facilitates understanding of relationships by comparing one literature with another or others, and literature with other fields of knowledge such as history, politics, religion and philosophy. In line with this, the paper employs the theory of New Historicism and studies T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and Ahmed Yerima's *Attahiru* in relation to their religious contexts in order to evaluate the playwrights' adaptation and handling of the historical material as well as the manner by which they use it to explore the issue of self-conquest as demonstrated by the two historical protagonists.

Comparative literature, according to René Wellek and Austin Warren (1978), refers to “the study of relationships between two or more literatures.” Henry Remak (1971) provides another fairly straightforward definition of ‘comparative literature’ as,

The study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts (e.g., painting, sculpture, architecture, music), philosophy, history, the social sciences (e.g. politics, economics, sociology), the sciences, religion, etc., on the other (cited in Shalaby, 2013:1).

In line with the aforementioned definitions the theorists in this field categorized comparative literature into interdisciplinary; comparison between literature and other fields like religion, history, etc or intra-disciplinary; comparison between two or more literatures. As such, this study falls within both two categories. Firstly, it is intra-disciplinary since it compares not only two literatures but two play-texts. This makes it possible to draw comparisons between two works of a cross-cultural nature and seek to reveal the close affinity between them. *Murder in the Cathedral* and *Attahiru* represent not only literatures from different historical periods, but also different cultures and motivation. Secondly, since the work focuses mainly on the use of history to explore the issue of self-conquest, then it can also be considered as interdisciplinary as it compares the nexus between literature and religion.

On the affinity between drama and religion, the history of literature clearly shows that religion has always been a rich source of material for the world of art in general and for drama in particular. Scholars have noted that the origin of tragedy itself could be traced back to religious rituals performed for the appeasement and celebration of ancient Greek gods (Baldry: 1979, Crow: 1983). On this robust relationship between drama and religion which has flourished for centuries, and has generated much discussion, Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood (2013) argues that “in the eyes of the fifth century audiences... tragedies were, among other things, a discourse of religious exploration” (cited in Shalaby, 2013: 78). The treatment of religious themes was also basic feature of all forms of literature from different parts of the world. Many artists relied on the religious context for their creative materials or we can say that they utilize the medium of literature, for theological purposes as well. Mineke Schipper (1989: 55) in her “Origin and Forms of Drama; The African Context” argues that drama “developed from religious rites because of examples of such development are found in different places of the world, in Africa and elsewhere.” Thus, from the early development of drama many playwrights have utilized religious materials for their play creating *Oedipus Rex* by the Greek tragedian, Sophocles can be seen as one of the precursors of creating drama based on religious materials and rituals. Likewise its African adaptation by Nigerian playwright, Ola Rotimi, *The gods are not to blame* (1971) which follows the same trend using Yoruba native religion. Moreover, in many instances playwrights across different cultures revisited history in order to treat religious issues in their drama works. The British playwright George Bernard Shaw in *Saint Joan* (1923), Wole Soyinka in *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) and Salah Abd al Sabur in *Murder in Baghdad* (1972) are good examples.

Using this aspect of religion, this paper examines and analyzes the issue of self-conquest as explored in Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and Yerima's *Attahiru*. The work tries to find a link between the selected plays in the manner they depict their historical protagonists in their respective spiritual journeys towards achieving what can be seen as self-conquest amidst conflicts with temporal powers. The paper tries to show some similarities between the two spiritual leaders who sacrifice their worldly desires for the sake of achieving eternal salvation.

Man in this world is always bedevilled by the exerting urge to succumb to his worldly temporal desires at the expense of his spiritual demands as enshrined by his religion. The ability to deaden this bodily lust for the sake of achieving heavenly rewards is what constitutes self-conquest. According to Mustapha Muhammad,

Duality is an essential feature of the human life. What is required is a balance between the exerting corporeal/mundane and lofty spiritual demands that continually colour our conduct. Happiness comes from an inflexible will to serve God and humanity in accordance with the Glorious Message (2008: 88).

The afore-quoted submission shows that man is perpetually caught up in the struggle between the glamour of temporal life and the spiritual satisfaction, and that the attainment of the latter is a result of what can be seen as self-conquest. That is, the ability of man to suppress and deaden his own worldly desires in order to achieve spiritual bliss. This is one of the religious issues explored in the selected plays of this study. Both Archbishop Thomas and Sultan Attahiru are confronted with the temptation to surrender to the mundane as opposed to the spiritual. However, both the historical protagonists achieve self-mortification as they sacrifice their lives in the quest for salvation.

First, Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* is a modern play that chronicles the last episode of the life of Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury in the twelfth century. Thomas was dedicated to his service as the Archbishop to the extent of refusing to pardon the monarch of that time, King Henry II. The two used to be good friends to the extent that Henry appointed Becket the important position of Archbishop. However, after the appointment series of clashes ensued between the two mainly revolving around the conflict between the church and the state, the two most powerful institutions in the English society of that age and the conflict culminated into the assassination of the Archbishop by knights of King Henry.

Although T.S Eliot proclaimed himself as both "Royalist in politics" and "Anglo – Catholic in religion" his religious leaning took precedence over his political ideas in most of his plays.

In *Murder in the Cathedral* which he wrote for a religious occasion, the Canterbury Festival, he explores a number of religious issues such as sacrifice and martyrdom in order to respond to the socio-political order underlying the modern society of his time. The play is written at a time when there was sharp decline in religion and religious values in his modern English society that were ravaged by modern ideas. Already the society was moving inexorably toward secularism and the materialism which accompanies it. As such, *Murder in the Cathedral* goes beyond mere reflection of medieval past but also serves as Eliot's response to the problems of his age from religious and philosophical standpoints. He is convinced about the socio-cultural importance of religion as a primordial binding force in his society as he explains in detail in his *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture*,

It is in Christianity that our arts have developed. It is in Christianity that the laws of Europe have until recently been rooted... An individual European may not believe that the Christian Faith is true and yet what he says, and makes and does, will all spring out of his heritage of Christian culture and depends upon that culture for its meaning ... I do not believe that the culture of Europe could survive the complete disappearance of the Christian Faith ... If Christianity goes the whole of our culture goes (Eliot, 1948: 122).

The quotation above clearly demonstrates Eliot's strong conviction about the role of religion in the revival of the secular society of his time. Cooper (2007) contends that Eliot's "theological tendencies and interest have come out as dramas of salvation and submission to God in an age increasingly devoted to the secular panaceas promised by the mechanized production of wellbeing through the wonders of materialism, down to earth commodity consumption and wealth accumulation." As such, in *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot deploys the theme of religion in order to highlight some lost religious values among his people whose faith has been shaken as a result of the changes that characterized the modern period. He uses the play to highlight certain presumption of Christianity and specifically the kind of torture and suffering which a true Christian can find himself in his search for heavenly and eternal glory.

The historical works which served as the source materials for Eliot in writing of the play stopped at mere recording or reporting of the facts surrounding the conflict and eventual assassination of Thomas. However as an artist, Eliot goes deeper and prisms the facts to reveal some important aspects of the history. Instead of presenting a direct recreation of the events,

the play imbues a kind of creative magic and elaborately presents the kind of internal conflict and turmoil the Archbishop passes through before he achieves martyrdom.

Sacrifice and martyrdom are considered as the most prominent religious values the playwright explores and which formed the central themes of the play. Scott (2001: 22) posits that martyrdom was not merely a concern for theologians or hagiographers, but was a topic embraced in all branches of the arts. However, instead of tackling Thomas' martyrdom straight ahead as historian does, Eliot spent a lot of time exploring the issue of self-conquest using Thomas encounters with the Tempters and Knights in order to demonstrate that, the protagonist is able to achieve his martyrdom and eventual sainthood only after he succeeds in conquering the exerting corporeal and mundane lusts in him. The aim is to present Thomas as a true martyr who first conquers his worldly and bodily desires before he dies defending "the Law of God above the law of man". Through his characterization in the play, the Archbishop is shown to be a man who completely divorces himself from earthly splendour and submits to the will of God. This can be seen as the playwright's attempt to provide a hagiographic re-enactment of the religious strength of Thomas Becket. After his several valiant attempts to thwart the King's attempts to compromise the ecclesiastical church by standing against all of the latter's intimidation and manipulations, he now totally embraces his martyrdom which he considers as the will of God, as he expresses in the sermon he delivers on the Christmas morning:

A Christian martyrdom is never an accident, for Saints are not made by accident. Still less is a Christian martyrdom the effects of man's will to become a saint. Martyrdom is always the design of God. It is never the design of man, for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God and who no longer desires anything for himself not even glory of being a martyr. (Eliot, 1965:49)

In this sermon, Thomas clearly explains what constitutes a true martyr in Christianity. The sermon also vindicates the sincerity of his martyrdom and reaffirms his conquest over the corporeal and mundane lusts.

Temptation as a religious concept lies deep in all the divine religions as men of God are constantly confronted by one form of temptation or the other in their lives. Like in Islam, temptation in Christianity is connected to Satan, who is seen as the embodiment of all evil. In the play, Eliot explores this concept using the four temptations faced by Thomas in Part One which symbolically serve as the secular ideology of the modern society of which the play is written as portrayed in the Archbishop's struggle against the Four Tempters that try to derail him from championing the ecclesiastical claims of the church and corrupt his spiritual

aspiration. Unlike the historical works that merely record the historical events of Thomas-Henry conflict that led to the assassination of the Archbishop, *Murder in the Cathedral* as drama offers the readers/audience an opportunity to glimpse in the inner struggle of the protagonist through his encounter with the Four Tempters. As such, the play is seen at a higher plane than history since it expresses the unspeakable in history by stressing the inner struggle of the protagonist.

Thomas' stellar record as seen in his ability to withstand the ordeals of life in exile and his courageous return to England in an uncertain atmosphere is tested by the appearance of the Four Tempters with their tantalizing secular offers which Thomas manages to dismiss one after the other. The First Tempter offers Thomas earthly pleasures by recounting the "good time" which the Archbishop enjoyed during his chancellorship. He opens the door for the Archbishop to regain the life he savoured together with the King of: Fluting in the meadows, violets in the hall,/ Laughter and apple-blossom floating on the water,/ Singing at nightfall, whispering in chambers,/ Eating up the darkness, with wit and wine and wisdom (Eliot, 1965:34).

In line with the first temptation, the second one tempts Thomas with a chance of reclaiming his share of the temporal power as Chancellor which he relinquished immediately he was made Archbishop, a position which the Second Tempter views as very rewarding: "King commands, Chancellor richly rules." In addition to the worldly reward, the Tempter also points out to Thomas that the position of Chancellor would also grant him the chance of doing some other godly things such as: Disarm the Ruffian, strengthen the laws,/ Rules for the good of the better cause./ Dispensing justice make all even (Eliot, 1965:37). However, the Archbishop is well prepared to spot the ungodly motive in the Tempter's offer that earthly power would only come "at a price of a certain submission." He eloquently dismisses the offer of power that "was once exaltation" since now from his Archbishopric position he considers it as "mean descent" in comparison to his now elevated position of the servant of God.

The Third Tempter proposes an alliance between Thomas and the barons and therefore tests the limits of the Archbishop's dedication to the service of Christ and his disenchantment with temporal desires. As with the previous temptations, Thomas sweeps this one aside closing the door for any form of betrayal; first by refusing to betray an old friend (King Henry), and second by affirming his main duty of being a servant of God. The fourth and the final Tempter comes with the most dangerous temptation; a temptation which many men of God failed to overcome; doing the right thing for the wrong reason. He offers Thomas what he

desires. He urges the priest to seek for martyrdom and therefore achieve the status of a holy man; a Saint and tempts him with how this would make him emerge victorious in his tussle with the King:

But think Thomas, think the glory after death.  
When King is dead, there is another King,  
...  
King is forgotten, when another shall come:  
Saint and martyr rule from the tomb.  
Think, Thomas, think of enemies dismayed,  
Think of pilgrims, standing in line  
Before the glittering jewelled shrine (Eliot, 1965:47).

As can be seen from the lines quoted above, the Tempter coats his deception with what Thomas desires as he himself admits: “Who are you tempting with my own desires?” No wonder the Archbishop himself, in spite of been able to resist it, considers it the “greatest treason” as it stirs the feeling of pride within him, a sin that many religious men failed to overcome; “To do the right deed for the wrong reason.”

This particular scene of Thomas encounter with the Four Tempters is very significant in appreciating the history of Thomas Becket. With this, the play creatively dramatizes the four aspects of the Archbishop which help in reflecting the complex nature of human beings and also symbolize man’s struggle with his own self. Coghill (1965:107) contends that the Four Tempters represent the four aspects of Thomas, and his encounter with the Fourth Tempter gives him the opportunity to re-examine the purpose of his impending martyrdom. He is able to avoid the “damnation in pride” which would have served as his undoing. He is finally able to overcome this egotistical tendency and feeling and totally submits himself to the will of God. With this, we can say he demonstrates his strong sense of duty to his people as he resists all temptations to achieve self-conquest and eventual martyrdom. Thus, in addition to the mere reflection of events the historical texts do, as drama, *Murder in the Cathedral* re-examines the authenticity of Thomas sainthood and therefore implicitly reveals the moral integrity and inspiration that influenced his actions.

Apart from temptation, another problem faces by Thomas in his spiritual journey is intimidation which is demonstrated in his encounter with the Four Knights who give him only three options; to surrender to the monarch, go for another exile, or risk his life. It is in his response to the King’s command to go for another exile that Thomas’ true virtue as a man of God becomes clearer:

If that is the King’s command, I will be bold

To say: Seven years were my people without  
My presence; Seven years of misery and pain

...

Never again, you must make no doubt,

Shall the sea run between the Shepherd and his fold (Eliot, 1965:71)

These lines clearly portray Thomas as a true martyr as he chooses to stay and face death as an optimum option for the benefit of others; his people and his society. According to Shalaby (2013), Eagleton sees martyrdom as “freely surrendering what you esteem for the benefit of others.” As such, rather than embark on another exile to save his life, Thomas chooses to fulfil his ultimate desire of sacrificing his life for the sake of the church: “I give my life / To the Law of God above the Law of man.” Thus, when he is finally killed by the Knights, his death symbolizes the “triumph of the cross”.

*Attahiru* on the other hand is written by Nigerian playwright, Ahmed Yerima. It is a recreation of events that occurred in Northern Nigeria during the British colonial conquest of the region. The playwright recreates these historical events by dramatizing the episodes that led to the emergence of Attahiru as the new caliph at a time when the British imperial forces were advancing on Sokoto, the administrative and spiritual headquarters of the vast caliphate in 1903. The play chronicles Caliph Attahiru’s gallant and patriotic resistance which led to his martyrdom at the battlefield defending Islam and his people from foreign invaders.

Like *Murder in the Cathedral*, *Attahiru* also explores the issue of self-conquest. However, most of the earlier reviews focus mainly on either the historical or socio-political aspects of the play, understandably looking at it from the post-colonial angle it was written. This paper attempts to look at the religiosity of the play, especially focusing on the characterization of Caliph Attahiru as an embodiment of the Islamic values and therefore placing the text in its religious context. In his paper, “Historicism, Sultan Attahiru, the European Conquest and Dramaturgy”, Yerima affirms that *Attahiru* is premised on the Islamic religion,

The first heritage, which I used to situate the play, is religious. This is because the essence of the Sokoto Caliphate is religious. The caliphate was born on the premise of Islam. I therefore built the society presented in the play with characters... On the Islamic references of Al-Qur’an, the hadith and the symbolic images of the caliphate itself (cited in Ewojobi: 2012).



This is exactly the case. The history of Sokoto caliphate can never be separated from Islam which provided the basis and motivation for Sheikh Usman bn Fodio's Jihad upon which the caliphate emerged and since then remained as unifying force in the entire caliphate.

It would be appropriate then to put *Attahiru* in its religious context in order to provide a new historicist reading which helps to investigate source of inspirations and strength of the protagonist. Contrary to many historical sources that try to emphasize political bent of the conflict with the Whiteman, this paper shows its religious overtone by focusing on the presentation of the eponymous hero and his people. In the play, the white colonialists try to make the people believe that their penetration into Sokoto has nothing to do with religion. However, the Caliph and the entire people see it as purely a conflict between the infidels and the faithful.

Therefore, this paper argues that the conflict in *Attahiru* is about the contestation of power between political entity represented by European colonizers and religious authority represented by the Caliph and his people. The motivation for the British colonialists is purely the quest for political domination over the vast Sokoto Caliphate with all the socio-economic trappings that accompany it as can be seen in how their political rivalry with the French propelled them to advance and sack Sokoto. It is all about territorial expansion and economic exploitation as Lugard explains to Abbas:

You know, you Muslims are getting it all wrong. This is not a religious war. It is a war of superiority of wills. I have the machines and guns. You have what I need to trade with, so if one of us is stubborn, or refuses to co-operate, then a little nudge is needed. (Yerima, 1999: 59).

But on the other hand, the Caliph and his people are not trying to defend the political power but rather they are more concerned with the defense of Islamic faith. Instead of seeing the conflict with the whiteman as political, as Lugard wants them to do, they consider it as an attack on their religion. As such, they respond to the challenges within the premise of Jihad. In the Caliph's remark after the heated deliberation with the decision makers of the caliphate, he clearly demonstrates how the Muslims see their conflict with the British: To this effect, the Waziri must write to him (Lugard) this reply. Tell the infidel that we did not invite him to interfere with our problems. He has his religion and we have ours... (Yerima 1999:33). The instructions given by the Caliph here clearly show that the conflict is between religion and political power. While the latter is influenced by the British foreign policy in the quest for

territorial expansion, the former is shaped by Islamic conception of Jihad with the prime aim of protecting the dignity of Islam.

There are many historical works on the life and times of Caliph Attahiru all of which attempt to give a factual documentation of the events. Yerima's *Attahiru* as the first dramatic recreation of this story, imaginatively tries "to give life to the past." As such, this new historicist reading demonstrates the way the play, as living art, differs with historical works on the same subject by bringing into life aspect of the protagonist that are not revealed or emphasized in history. Through the characterization of the historical protagonist, the play explores the issue of self-conquest which is emphasized through the Islamic conception of Jihad. Literally, Jihad means a holy war undertaken by Muslims. However, many Islamic scholars contend that the meaning of the concept goes beyond the physical confrontation to the inner personal spiritual struggle for self-improvement and against evil which is seen by many scholars as the greater form of Jihad. This falls within what is referred to as "self-conquest" that is, the ability of one to overcome the lust inherent in himself. That is the strength to resist the temptation to surrender to the worldly and bodily desires as opposed to the spiritual.

Throughout the play, Caliph Attahiru is depicted as the embodiment of the Islamic values. He is shown as ideal Muslim leader who stands firm in his belief and faith in spite of the intimidation and temptation from the colonialists. For him, honour and faith become his vehicle for attainment of divine status (Julius-Adeoye: 2013). The Caliph is depicted as the custodian, upholder and protector of the besieged religion within the context of colonization. When the whiteman threatens, or even undermines the authorities bestowed on him by his religion, the Caliph does not decide on his own. He humbly brings the matter to his council for rigorous assessment because he never sees the colonial activities as threat to his personal position of authority but rather as an attack on the religion of Islam and the entire Muslim Ummah. Thus, when the decision is made about going to war against the British, it is not to protect the throne of Attahiru, rather to defend the Islamic state and faith against the infidels.

Furthermore, the significance of the Caliph's refusal to accept Lugard's offer of friendship is very important in appreciating the character of Attahiru. The request is seen as great temptation against the Caliph's level of piety. If he grants the request of the British and accept them as friends that means he is going to be allowed to stay in his position as the caliph like what happened in Katsina and other parts of the caliphate where the Muslim

leaders made peace with the British. However in the case of Attahiru, he sees this as an act of privileging the worldly, corporeal and mundane desires over and above the spiritual aspiration promised by remaining steadfast in one's faith. He sees the acceptance of British dominance as succumbing to the bodily pleasure of life which he considers temporal and hence unimportant compared to the eternal bliss offered by holding firm to his religion. Thus, he considers accepting the whiteman's domination as bringing shame to the religion of Islam and the entire people as we can see in his comments:

They (whitemen) throw dust of shame all over the place, and yet with their bloody hands they want you to shake and embrace them while the dust of shame settles on your face (Yerima, 1999: 24).

Even the threat of Lugard in the letter that the British soldiers "have already established British rule over Muslim lands all over the world" (27) fails to deter the Caliph's determination to resist the imperialists' penetration into Sokoto. Instead Attahiru and his court officials see Katsina's surrender to the British rule as shameful and humiliating to the Muslims:

MADAKI: I will beg the Marafa to understand. To stain a people with shame is hard to wash clean my lord. To avert war like the Katsina people is to have the whiteman bring his paper for the Caliph to sign. It is for the whiteman to tell us to stop owning slave, to stop Islam. It is also to have a whiteman live in our midst as the master of the Caliph, and fly his stupid flag (Yerima, 1999:44).

This clearly shows that the Caliph's acceptance of whiteman's offer for peace would definitely come at a price of shame and humiliation. The Caliph and his followers reject this in favour of the dignity, pride and above all, the spiritual bliss which their refusal of the temporal benefits would bring them. Therefore, Attahiru's position with regard to this conflict with the European usurpers is that he prefers to lose his throne or even his life than to live in shame under the control of the foreign infidels unleashed by the British Empire. This is quite symbolic of the ideal Muslim leader as we can see others are eager to accept the offer under the humiliating conditions.

One aspect of history of the Sokoto's resistance to the British colonization is the decision of Caliph Attahiru and his Muslim army to migrate and leave Sokoto at the time of the whiteman's onslaught. The Hijra, as it is regarded in Islam, was recorded by historians in

their works. However, in the dramatization of the history in *Attahiru* the playwright tries to show that the main reason for this decision to leave the headquarters is not an attempt to escape death by the Caliph but rather to save lives of the weaker members of the caliphate, to shame the whiteman and of course to prepare for the greater battle:

GALADIMA: The sense is that we shall be saving lives your Highness. The lives of women, children, and the old. It is accepted within Islam your Highness. You excuse yourself from the presence of the enemies, in order to re-group, and fight, stronger, and more focused (45).

Like Sophocles' tragedy, *Oedipus Rex* in which the protagonists impending tragic end is foretold or known, that of Attahiru is also foretold as he learns in his discussion with Mallam about his recurrent dream about his impending martyrdom (41) which further tests the Caliph's determination to remain firmly on course of his religion. So when the Mallam tells the Caliph that what he saw in the dream signals what was foretold about the lifespan of Sheik Usman Dan Fodio's caliphate and his dream "confirms the beginning of the end", Attahiru does not falter. Rather he seeks the Mallam's spiritual guidance on how to approach his impending martyrdom before making one of his most powerful and courageous statements in the play:

If indeed, there is a prophecy that must end Shehu's Empire in my reign as Caliph, then this is no time to mourn, but a time of gratitude. A time of prayer and great thanks to Allah that I am the chosen one. A time to stand firm, defending the faith, and carrying out the wish of the Almighty. (*Pause*) And what can I say to Him, but, Al-hamdu lillah! (Yerima, 1999: 43).

This affirms the stellar qualities of Caliph Attahiru as the leader of the muslims as it demonstrates the strength of character and piety even at a time when his power and authority is threatened.

The play reveals the inner conflict the Caliph finds himself in his spiritual journey towards achieving self-conquest and martyrdom. He is trapped in a dilemma of satisfying the desires of the body or the spiritual which further imbues his human nature. This is important so as the audience/readers of this play can identify themselves with the protagonist. Moreover, even when the Caliph learns that his brother Prince Muhammad al-Tahir Aliyu has been appointed as his replacement by the British, he did not feel any regret of losing his crown but only ponders and laments on the humiliating condition his successor would find himself under the

control of “his infidel friends (61).” Instead of feeling regret for losing the throne of his ancestors only six months after his ascendancy, Caliph Attahiru is absorbed in weighing what he has done during his short stint as the Sarkin Musulmi:

It is not how long, but what you did while on the throne that people will remember. Tonight, I say let them remember us all here as heroes not as the whiteman’s slaves. Let them remember that when it was time to say no in the name of Allah one humble Muslim led a group of believers to say no to colonial oppression even at the cost of our lives! We shall never surrender! (Yerima, 1999: 61)

The significance of this particular episode is that, while others are eager to grab the throne vacated by Attahiru under the humiliating condition, the Caliph is reveling in his triumph over the temptations and the motivation to surrender to the mundane as opposed to the spiritual and therefore achieving self-conquest. This clearly portrays him as an embodiment of the religious values that are lacking in most of the followers of the Islamic faith, both the leaders and the led.

### **Conclusion**

Using comparative study, this paper reveals the theatrical link between the two selected plays on one level and the nexus between literature and religion on the other. The paper reveals that, in spite of their periodical gap as well as geographical and cultural distance, there is close affinity between the works especially in how the playwrights recreate history to explore the issue of self-conquest. Thomas Becket is offered with the chance of regaining his friendship with King Henry, a decision if taken, would give him a chance to regain his share of the temporal political power with all its materialistic benefits and therefore satisfy his bodily, material lusts. However, guided by the religious demands on him as enjoined in the Holy Bible and Christianity, the priest demonstrates his inflexible will to serve God by refusing to surrender to the exerting corporal and mundane desires in favour of the eternal salvation promised by remaining steadfast in the service of God. At last, he is able to get what he desires of achieving martyrdom for the sake of God and thereafter achieving the position of sainthood in Christianity as a result of his religious virtues.

Attahiru on the other hand faces his own kinds of temptations. Here is a man whose position of power was threatened just six months after his ascendancy to the throne of his forefathers. However, the Caliph refuses to succumb to the urge to surrender to the bodily and material lusts for political power. The Sultan rejects the British offer for friendship which would give

him the chance of retaining the coveted throne. He realizes very well that, if he accepts the whiteman's offer the political position he is occupying will be secured but he refuses the bodily motivations for the temporal benefit which he strongly believes would only bring shame and humiliation. Instead he favours the lofty spiritual promises of upholding his religious demands. Like Thomas Becket, in the end Attahiru achieves the highest position of martyrdom for the sake of his religion. As such, both works show the struggle of the historical figures in achieving self-conquest as both succeed in suppressing their bodily desires in their quest for salvation.

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